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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2020 WritersDigest.com

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# NEW BEGINNINGS

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EVERY NEW WRITER MAKES

**GET YOUR GROOVE BACK**  
AFTER A WRITING BREAK

INSIDER TIPS TO  
**FREELANCE SUCCESS**

**UNINSPIRED?** HOW TO  
TRANSFORM YOUR  
BLANK PAGE EXPERIENCE

WRITE OPENINGS THAT  
**HOOK READERS**

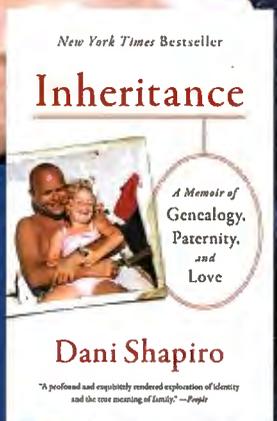
**+** **STORY IDEA VS.  
PREMISE: WHAT'S  
THE DIFFERENCE?**



WD INTERVIEW

## Dani Shapiro

THE BESTSELLING MEMOIRIST  
DISCUSSES THE CHALLENGES OF  
WRITING *INHERITANCE*



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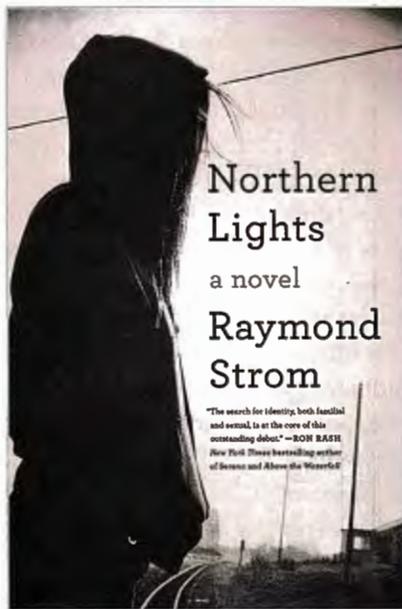
## 10-MINUTE MEMOIR

Support the Arts and  
They May Support You

BY RAYMOND STROM

Six years ago, I had no hope of publishing a novel. I had given up entirely. My days in the MFA program at the City College of New York (CCNY) were long behind me, the thesis I had written stuffed into a desk drawer, my one publication a distant memory. Not that I admitted it—having spent three years and \$25,000 on my MFA, I wasn't about to tell anyone I'd given up—I'd say I had a mess of pages, which was true, but I had begun looking for reasons not to write. My full-time job as an academic advisor came with a tuition exemption, so I signed up for courses in Spanish, French, Latin, and math. If my writing ever came up in conversation, I said I was merely too busy between work and classes, a perfectly acceptable excuse, and often I'd add that I hoped to get back to it someday.

This lie went on for years, from graduation day until the fall of 2013, when two former classmates of mine put together a crowdfunding campaign to start a literary magazine. They had done good work with a previous journal, *The Coffin Factory*, so I gave them \$25. That night I received a message from the founders thanking me for my donation and, after I said that I wished I could have given more, they asked me if I had a story.



I said I didn't—that I was too busy with my Spanish classes—and figured that would be the end of it, but I received another message later: “What about that story you told in the cowboy boot store in Texas? Did you ever write that?” And when I said no, they told me to try to give it a shot over winter break. I had no excuse.

The CCNY MFA program used to take trips to Larry McMurtry's<sup>1</sup> hometown of Archer City, Texas twice a year, and students were able to participate in many local activities. I toured Larry's house (he had a Paul Gauguin painting in his bedroom and a copy of *How to Write an Award-*



*Winning Screenplay* on his desk) and, though I didn't get to meet him, I know other groups did. We watched *The Last Picture Show* in the theater where the characters in the movie go to the movies. We toured oil-drilling operations. We went to shooting ranges to test out shotguns and rifles. A favorite trip among the students is boot shopping in Wichita Falls, not exactly my bag, but I hadn't understood why everyone was getting in the van and went along just to be part of the group. When we got to the store, I immediately felt uncomfortable—assaulted by memories of cowboy boots stomping my forehead—and

1. Larry McMurtry is the author of more than 20 novels, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lonesome Dove*. He also won an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for *Brokeback Mountain*.

my friends noticed. One friend asked me what I had against Western wear, and I told her and a couple other people about the Confederate flag revival in my hometown in 1997, how nearly every person involved had had it out for me, and how most of them had worn cowboy boots. It was two of these friends who were starting the literary magazine.

Come mid-December, I pulled my MFA thesis out of my desk and found that I had one page about the Confederate flag rally and a couple of other pages about rural kids doing meth; a start. Over the month of January, I woke up early each day so I could make additions and changes, rework the dialogue, arrange the scenes into the most sensible order—so when my deadline arrived I gave them the best story I had ever written, “Sisyphus & Lucifer,” and included my bio: *Raymond Strom has had work published in Fiction.*

They published my story in the first issue of *Tweed’s* alongside Joyce Carol Oates, Lydia Davis, and Charles Simic on glossy pages among artwork and interviews, bound between thick matte covers. It was a hefty and beautiful object—nice to hold and touch. I thought then that it ached to be read. It was an achievement to be published in a journal this nice and, though I had only earned \$300, I suddenly felt

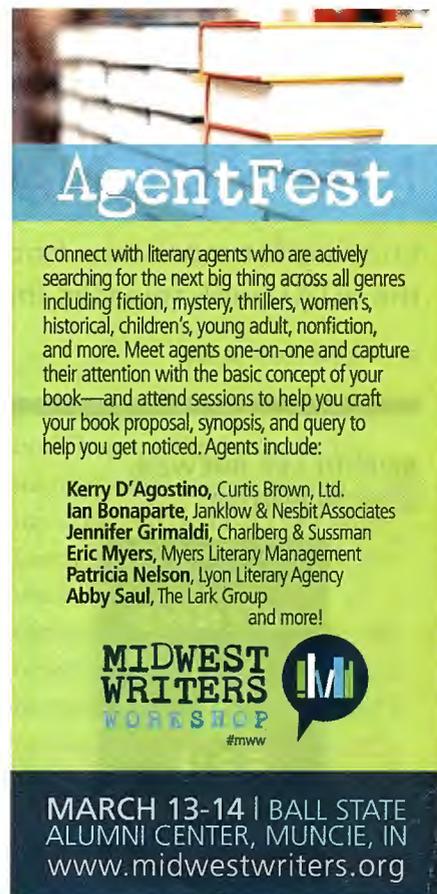
that my MFA had been worthwhile—maybe I hadn’t wasted my whole life chasing a pointless dream, maybe I would write a novel after all. The editors of *Tweed’s* had gone a step further to ensure this by adding to my bio: *Raymond Strom has had work published in Fiction, and he is currently working on a novel.*

That independent clause changed my life. An agent read my story, after which he contacted the editor and asked for my contact info. In an email, he mentioned that he saw I was writing a novel and that he would love to see it. I replied that yes, I certainly was writing a novel, and that I could have a draft to him by the end of August. We met that autumn and discussed the merits of my draft, and he saw something in it that I teased out for the next three years and eventually, everything came around. Our email threads began to contain mentions of publishers instead of more edits, and in June 2017, we sold my debut novel to Simon & Schuster. The \$25 donation I made to get all of this going was certainly the best investment I’ve ever made.

**Raymond Strom** is the author of *Northern Lights*, published in February 2019 by Simon & Schuster. He’d like to thank Fred Reynolds, Laura Isaacman, Randy Rosenthal, Adam Eaglin, and Ira Silverberg for their roles in the story above.



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